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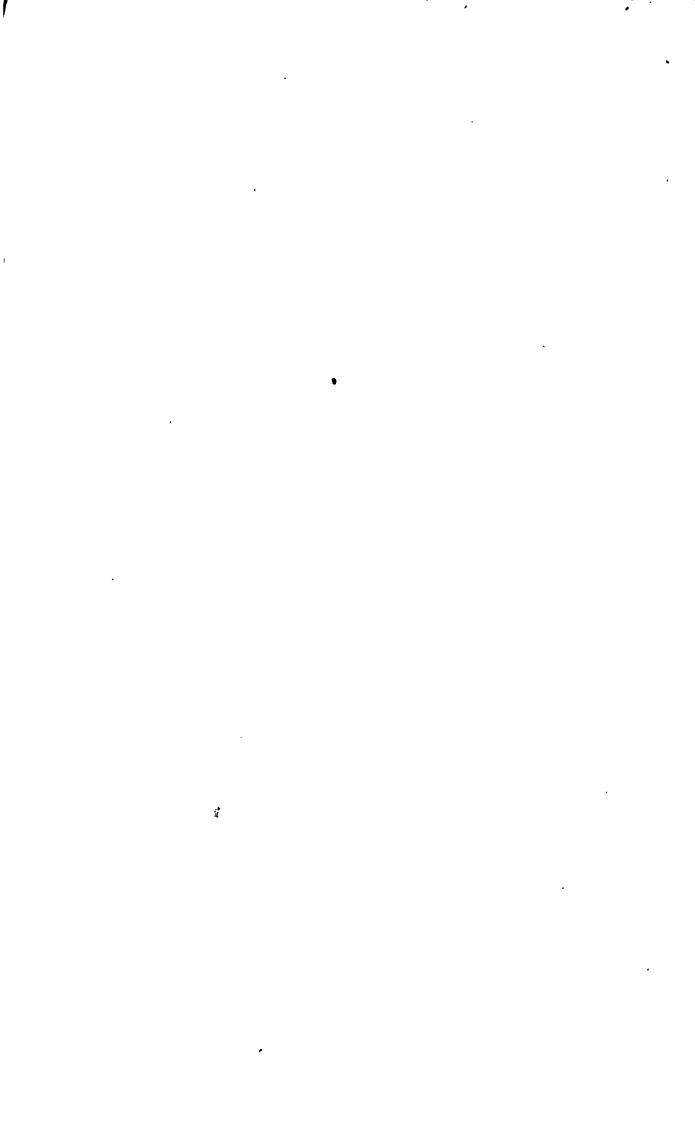


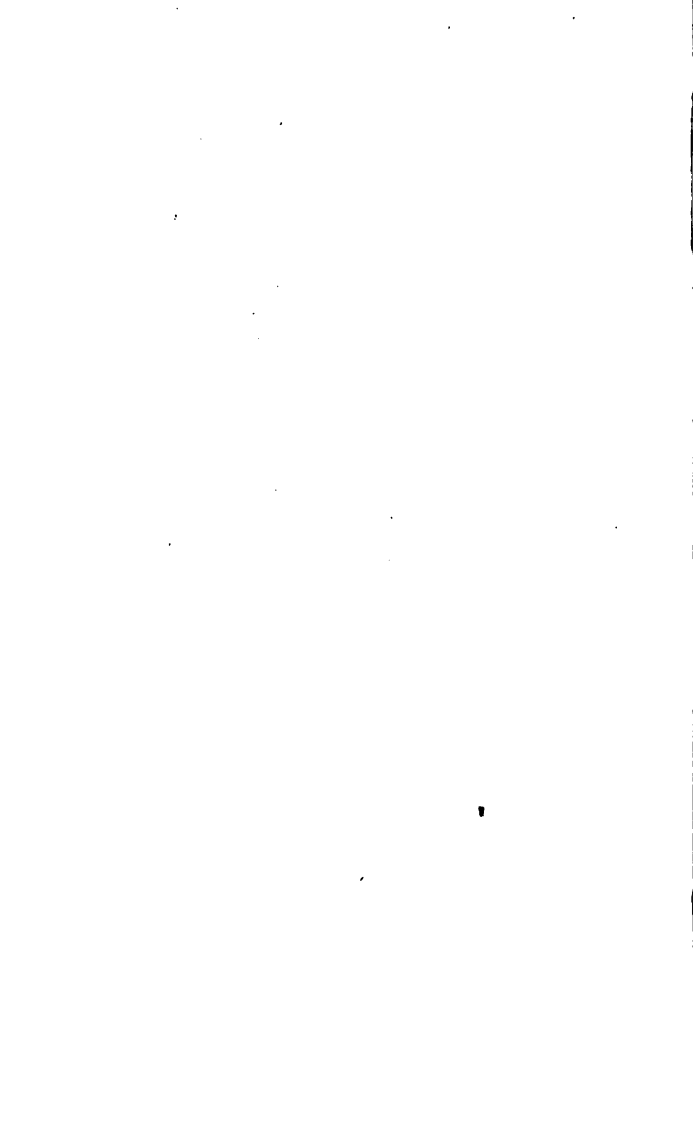
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INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE.



THE

INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE.

Understandest thou what thou readeſt ? *Acts 8 : 30.*

Written for the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, and
Revised by the Committee of Publication.

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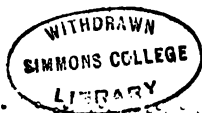
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NOTES

NOTE.

THE following work is designed to accompany the INSPIRATION and READING OF THE BIBLE, which have been recently published by the Society, and which should be introduced into every Sabbath school Library in our country. While it does not pretend to claim equality with those beautiful books in any respect, it may nevertheless partially supply a want which has long been felt in our Sabbath schools, and together with them, afford some help in the study of the sacred oracles. As utility rather than originality has been the aim of the writer, he has freely consulted those who are wiser than himself; and has endeavored to bring together, in a popular form, those hints, rules, and illustrations which are of most importance in the reading of the

Bible, without stopping to indicate the more learned sources from which some of them may have been derived. 'It would be unjust, however, not to refer to Van Mildert's Bampton Lectures, to which he has been indebted for much valuable assistance in this undertaking. It is hoped that, with all its imperfections, this little book may be of some use to a large class of persons in our Churches and Sabbath schools, who have not access to larger works on the subject of interpretation, or to whom those works, from their scientific character, would be nearly useless, and that it may tend to hasten the time when all shall know the Lord from the least to the greatest.

Cambridge, March, 1844.

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INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE.

INTRODUCTION.

IN the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we are told, that Philip, one of the earliest preachers of the Gospel, was, on a certain occasion, commanded to go into the way that led from Jerusalem to Gaza, in order to explain to an Ethiopian nobleman, a passage in the book of Isaiah, which he was devoutly reading. For this work, Philip was well prepared, both by the instruction he had received from the Apostles, and by the inward teaching of the Holy Ghost. He executed his commission faithfully, and successfully; and the Eunuch, instructed and baptized, went on

his way rejoicing, and became, in his turn the teacher of others.

This passage suggests the subject of the following work, namely, the *Interpretation of the Bible*.

This is a subject of great practical importance to all, and upon which every person ought to have clear and well settled views. Every one is bound by a divine command, John 5 : 39, to read the Bible for himself, if possible, in order to find that eternal life which it reveals ; and therefore should be solicitous to understand what he reads. But a great many persons are called in Divine providence to teach and explain the Scriptures to others. Not only ministers of the Gospel, who are sent forth, like Philip, to preach the word, but Sabbath school teachers, and parents, are bound to instruct those committed to their charge in things pertaining to God.

There is not a member of Christ's church, who may not be called upon to give explanations of Divine truth, upon which the everlasting condition of the inquirer may

depend. All persons, therefore, ought to understand the Scriptures at least so far as is essential to salvation, and be able to discharge the great duty of teaching, whenever properly called to do it, in such a manner, as to attain the great end of religious instruction, which is the salvation of those who are taught.

There is another reason why we should have some general and well settled principles of interpretation, namely, the amazing diversity of religious opinion which prevails in the community.

A large class among us, are secretly or openly opposed to Christianity, for reasons which they think lie in the Bible itself. But even among those who profess to receive the Scriptures as the word of God, there are the most discordant views, not only respecting subordinate matters, but doctrines and usages acknowledged on all hands to be fundamentally important.

This diversity of opinion upon religious subjects is as old as Christianity itself, and from its long and obstinate life, would

seem to be destined to be perpetual. Whatever Christian charity may constrain us to say and to hope respecting those who oppose, and endeavor to destroy each other, we must confess that this state of religious warfare upon subjects relating to the eternal salvation of men, among those who profess to understand the Bible, and to be able to teach the unlearned, is an enormous evil both to the church and to the world. It entirely destroys the bond of Christian fellowship among the followers of Christ, so that those who expect to be received into heaven, are unwilling to sit together at the same table on earth. It unsettles the faith and hope of many, and exposes them not only to the pain and fluctuation of doubt, but to danger of fatal mistake upon a subject of all others most important. It fosters the most corrupt and malignant passions of the human mind; and it has been frequently remarked, to the disgrace of Christians, that of all controversies, religious controversies are the most bitter and remorseless. It creates and perpetuates the

most incurable prejudices and alienations, among those who ought to be united in the closest bonds of Christian love. It hardens the community into open or secret unbelief, and contempt of Christianity, and greatly hinders the progress of that system of truth which is essential to human salvation; for the promulgation of the gospel, in the present divided condition of the church of Christ, implies the renewal, upon heathen ground, of all the controversies which have wrought so much evil in Christendom.

It is a question of great interest and importance, whence this irreconcilable and most hurtful discrepancy arises, and whether it is unavoidable and incurable. There seems to be no absolute necessity for this state of division and animosity in the human mind. For though it may be true that it is naturally impossible for all men to think exactly alike upon all things, yet surely there is nothing in the constitution and laws of the human mind that necessarily prevents harmony of opinion, and feeling, upon subjects of fundamental import-

ance. All men possess substantially the same intellectual and moral faculties, the same spiritual wants, and the same natural propensities; and therefore are capable of agreeing in belief and practice respecting all things essentially connected with their eternal well being.

Nor does the Bible justify this radical diversity among Christians. So far from intimating that there is any sufficient ground for it, the sacred writers pointedly condemn divisions in the church; and earnestly exhort their readers to "mind the same things," Phil. 3: 16, to "be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment." 1 Cor. 1: 10. With "one mind, and one mouth to glorify God." Rom. 15: 6. From which we naturally infer, that as there is but one revelation, and as the same truths are necessary for all, the whole body of believers might understand the Scriptures alike, and teach the same doctrines if they could be brought to the same moral condition, and were furnished with the same means of

knowledge, just as professors of natural science obtain substantially the same views of the great book of nature by the intelligent and faithful use of right methods ; and that wherever bitter and prolonged controversy exists upon points acknowledged to be vitally important to all men, there must be among some of the disputants a grievous abuse, or misapprehension of the text which they attempt to explain.

This inference is abundantly confirmed by the Bible which we all appeal to as authority. For while it clearly predicts the rise and temporary prevalence of the spirit of controversy, heresies, schisms, and offences in the church, and warns us against the arts of false teachers ; it declares that the time will come when all the people of God shall see eye to eye, Is. 52 : 8. When there will be one fold and one shepherd, John 10 : 16, and when all who believe will be of one mind and one heart, even as Christ is one with the Father. John 17 : 11, 21, 23. Now this unity in faith, in practice, and in affection, will not be pro-

duced by a new and plainer revelation, nor by placing the church upon a new foundation, nor by any radical change in the natural constitution of the human mind, but by means of a better moral state, a more diligent study of the divine oracles, and the faithful application of just principles of interpretation.

The Bible is indeed declared to be a plain book, easy to be understood, and able to make all men wise unto salvation. But this does not imply that men will be saved from error, and become wise unto salvation by merely possessing the sacred records, or even by every possible mode of reading them. On the contrary, we are warned against "corrupting the word of God;" 2 Cor. 2: 17, against "being spoiled by philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ;" Col. 2: 8. Against being led astray by false teachers; Math. 7: 15, against handling the word of God deceitfully; 2 Cor. 4: 2. And an apostle has said that there are some things in the Epis-

tles of Paul, which are hard to be understood, which the ignorant and unskillful wrest, as they do also the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. 2 Pet. 3: 16.

We see, then, that plain as the Bible really is, men may, and actually do misunderstand and pervert it, to their own destruction; and that the volume which was given to be the judge of controversy, the infallible teacher of man, and a light in our path to heaven, to guide, to comfort, and to sanctify the people of God, may be, and has been used to sanction the most pernicious heresies. There is no church, sect or party, however wild, fanatical, or destructive in their doctrines and practices, that does not profess to ground themselves upon the plain word of God, and to draw all its bitter waters from the fountain of life. And how could this be, if some of the numerous conflicting parties into which christendom is unhappily divided, did not, to a greater or less degree corrupt and pervert the divine oracles by a false state of mind, or false principles of interpretation?

It is certain, then, that while the Bible claims, and truly, to be written for all, and to be plain and easy to be understood, its interpretation requires some qualifications which all have not hitherto actually possessed, and efforts which all do not make.

What then is our duty amidst all this painful contradiction, and dangerous perversion of truth? Shall we float uncertainly upon the waves of controversy? Shall we be blown about by every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive? Shall we live in continual doubt and fear, which is but another name for spiritual death? Shall we refuse to read and to teach the Bible, or teach what we do not understand, and thus run the risk of destroying both ourselves and them that hear us? By no means. We ought to be well grounded, and settled, able to teach and admonish one another without danger of fundamental mistake, and to contend earnestly, not for uncertain speculations and commandments of men, but for the

faith once delivered to the saints. Jude v. 3. This is the duty, not of preachers only, but of all christians. But this duty rests upon the fact, that the Bible is the source of spiritual wisdom, not of doubt, and that by a proper method of studying it, all may be brought to acknowledge and embrace the truth as the foundation of their hopes. If this were not true, we must necessarily be ever learning, and never coming to the knowledge of the truth, and our teaching, instead of converting sinners from the error of their ways, and of edifying the church, would only increase the frightful catalogue of heresies which are so destructive to the spiritual interests of mankind.

The clear understanding, and the faithful interpretation of the Scriptures, whenever it becomes our duty to teach others, is therefore for us, and for all those who depend upon us for instruction, the great objects which we should ever keep in view. It is to little purpose that we circulate the Bible, and establish Sabbath schools, un-

less men read the sacred oracles with the spirit and the understanding which are necessary to make them savingly acquainted with the truths they reveal. Instead of being a savour of life unto life, they will be everywhere a savour of death unto death. Let every one, then, who reads the Bible, feel that it is a solemn duty which he owes to God, who has caused his word to be written for our learning, to use his best endeavors, and to avail himself of all necessary means, for obtaining clear views of religious truth, and ability to impart it to others. All those, especially, who sustain the responsible office of teachers in the church, whether in the pulpit, in the Sabbath school, or at the fire-side, should feel as Paul did, that a necessity is laid upon them to receive the truth pure from the fountain, and to teach neither more or less than God has commanded.

In view of our duties and of our dangers at the present day, we have thought it important to say a few words on the subject

of scriptural interpretation,—to lay before our readers some general principles which should guide us in reading the Bible, and to show the high importance of faithfully applying them in all our inquiries after truth, and in all our attempts to unfold the doctrines which relate to man's salvation to those around us. We shall not be very minute in our discussion of this subject. A few material points only will be touched upon, which, if they should be honestly and conscientiously adhered to by all, would probably guide them safely in all their inquiries; and produce among christians all that unity in respect to essential doctrines, and necessary practices which is desirable. There will always be some diversity of opinion upon matters of subordinate interest, but if we could be perfectly joined together in the same judgment respecting truths necessary to be believed and practiced by all men, this diversity would be of little importance, and it would be constantly growing less.

In exhibiting the principles which ought

to guide us in the reading of the Bible, it will not be necessary to dwell upon those which are applicable to all kinds of writing, and without which no book could be understood. We are sufficiently familiar with them, and there is no difficulty in their application. But the Bible is a peculiar book. It is indeed given to us in human language, and thus, to a certain extent is to be interpreted according to the general laws of language which every reader is presumed to refer to almost unconsciously at every step of his progress. But it is a book sent down from heaven. Holy men wrote it, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. It reveals the manifold wisdom of God in a mystery. It bears a character, therefore, which distinguishes it from all the writings of men, and is to be studied under the direction of some rules not applicable to all other writings.

We shall endeavor to present all the points necessary to be touched, in as plain and familiar a manner as possible, so that no attentive reader shall be in doubt re-

specting our meaning. We do not expect to teach those who have made this the subject of much thought and study. Our only aim is to aid those who enjoy fewer means of pursuing in a successful manner the study of the only book that can preserve them from error, purify them from sin, and prepare them for heaven. Most happy shall we be, if a single reader is guided safely in a path where so many have made shipwreck of faith, and a good conscience, and comes at length to that full assurance of hope which shall not be confounded at the last day.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE MORAL REQUISITES TO A RIGHT UNDERSTANDING OF THE BIBLE.

IN order to obtain clear and adequate views of the subjects presented in the Bible, and to become able and safe teachers of the truth, we must first of all be brought into a right moral condition. It is desirable, no doubt, that every reader should possess high intellectual qualifications—a clear and sound judgment, a retentive memory, an active imagination, profound acquaintance with languages, arts and sciences, history, geography, chronology, &c., for all these are powerful helps in reading the Bible. But we must not suppose that no one can be capable of reading the Scriptures, and of teaching the doctrines they contain, without all these high gifts of nature and learning. They necessarily exist among men in different degrees, and many, without

their own fault are extremely deficient in these respects. It is enough, if, together with diligence and faithfulness in the use of such means as are generally within the reach of all, there be a moderate share of natural ability and acquaintance with human learning. Some of the best scholars in the school of Christ, and most successful teachers of the doctrine of grace, are found among those who are by no means distinguished for intellectual or literary attainments.

On the other hand, no kind or degree of mental furniture will enable a person to understand and interpret the Bible, without a moral preparation which is not inherited by nature, nor obtained by mere study. We often find the deepest spiritual ignorance in connection with all the learning of the schools; and the most dangerous errors have been taught and defended by minds of the highest order. Much as Christianity has suffered from the weakness and ignorance of its advocates, it has suffered still more from unsanctified genius and talents.

There is a state of mind, according to the apostle, in which a man, whatever be his intellectual gifts, cannot receive or know the things of the spirit of God. 1 Cor. 2 : 14. Hence the exhortation, "If any man among you seemeth to be wise in the world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise; for the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God." 1 Cor. 3 : 18. To the same purpose the apostle asks, "Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" 1 Cor. 1 : 26. And our Saviour gave thanks to the Father, that the things of religion were hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed unto babes. Matt. 11 : 25.

A right moral preparation, is, therefore, essential to any true progress in the study of the Bible; and to obtain this, every one who wishes to understand the things of his peace, should labor with the utmost seriousness and zeal.

SECTION I.

PURITY AND SINGLENES OF HEART.

It has been well remarked, that the true sense of Scripture must necessarily be most easily ascertained by those whose moral state is most in accordance with its general character.

Now the most striking characteristic of the Bible is PURITY; and therefore the first requisite to the successful study of it, whether with reference to its authenticity, or to the explanation of particular doctrines, is freedom from moral corruptions, and a disposition to practice the perfect righteousness which is revealed in the life and precepts of Jesus Christ. It is not too much to say that all fundamental error respecting God and divine things, has its origin in a perverse and corrupt heart. We say fundamental error; because with the purest feelings and motives, in this state of imperfection, there may be many mistakes in respect to matters not essential to salvation.

Who can believe that he who denies the Divine origin of Christianity, or rejects any essential doctrine of the gospel, or grossly perverts important passages, has a pure and sincere heart?

Every one has been more or less conscious of the powerful influence which the affections exert over the understanding, not in compelling it to believe and act contrary to its clear convictions, but in diverting attention from disagreeable objects, in darkening the evidence of certain doctrines, in weakening the force of motives, in suggesting excuses for that course of conduct which is most agreeable to us, in producing an unwillingness to put forth those mental efforts which are necessary to gain clear views of an uncongenial truth, in magnifying the difficulties in the way of religion, and in distorting every subject that is not in harmony with them.

The Scriptures themselves frequently speak of a right state of the heart as the great condition of perceiving their moral beauty, and feeling the influence of the

truths which they reveal. "Blessed," says the Saviour, "are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Matt. 5: 8. "The fear of the Lord," by which is meant a right state of the affections towards God, "is the beginning of knowledge, and the instruction of wisdom." Prov. 1: 7; 15: 33. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him, and he will show them his covenant." Ps. 24: 14. "If any man will do the will of God, he shall know of the doctrine." John 7: 17. "But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience." Luke 8: 15.

While, therefore, we may not be called upon to judge the hearts of others who are in a state of doubt, or who fall into obvious mistakes respecting Christianity or any of its essential doctrines, we ought always to suspect that there is some moral evil at work in our hearts,—that sin is corrupting and perverting our affections,—when we feel an interest in denying the truth of the

Bible, or find great difficulty in understanding those statements which relate to the character of God, the plan of salvation, and a future retribution according to our works, or are disposed to weaken the motives to a holy life which are placed before us in the gospel.

SECTION II.

FREEDOM FROM PREJUDICE.

Every reader of the Bible ought to be aware of the pernicious influence which pre-conceived opinion, or prejudices, exert upon the mind under all circumstances, and especially in the reading of the Divine oracles.

Nothing, except the natural blindness and depravity of the heart, has produced more error, and doubt, and bitter controversy, than a disposition to measure every thing in the word of God, by the authority of some favorite author, by some supposed infallible maxim of philosophy, by some narrow theory adopted, perhaps, without

the slightest examination, and by the ever varying states of an ignorant and fickle mind.

The Jews could not understand Moses, nor receive the doctrines of Christ, though the truth was preached to them amidst the wonders and terrors of Divine power. Why? Because there was a veil upon their hearts, and their minds were blinded; and even to this day, when Moses or the apostles are read, the same veil remains untaken away. 2 Cor. 3: 14, 15.

This veil was a sinful prejudice. They had, in accordance with their wishes, determined upon the manner in which God should conduct the affairs of his kingdom. They had marked out a course for the coming Messiah. They had formed ideas respecting all that he was to teach and to accomplish: and, having settled it in their minds that he was to restore the Jewish nation to its former splendor, and reign over the whole world as a temporal king, they could not recognize in the Man of Sorrows the object of their expectation, nor submit

to his authority which he claimed to exercise over them. Even the chosen disciples could not comprehend the Saviour's discourses respecting his sufferings, death, resurrection, and triumph. Luke 9: 45. They doubted and reasoned among themselves as to what the rising from the dead should mean, Mark 9: 10; and once at least, Peter, apparently expressing the feelings of the rest, openly denied and rejected the doctrine of a suffering Messiah. Matt. 16: 22. All these doubts, and questionings, and mistakes, arose from prejudice. They had adopted the common Jewish opinion that Christ was to be a temporal deliverer, and their hearts rose against the idea that he must be set at nought by the rulers, and suffer death as a malefactor.

These are merely illustrations of what we continually witness in the church at the present day. Finding it impossible to reconcile the obvious doctrines of the Bible with the standard which passion, pride, ignorance, and self-will have combined to set up in the mind, men either reject Christian-

ity as altogether incredible, or by an unauthorized mode of interpretation, force the Scriptures to speak the language of their own thoughts, and violently assail every doctrine which cannot be made to coincide with their system. What but error, and confusion, and endless strife can result from such a principle of interpretation ?

If, therefore, we expect to understand and receive the whole truth which God has revealed for our instruction and salvation, we must endeavor to free our minds from all prejudice. We must not suffer mere human opinions and theories to obscure the light that shines from the Bible. We must not resolve to find there what we wish, nor force the text to speak the language of our feelings, but seek to know just what is the mind of the Spirit, and be willing to embrace cordially every thing that is clearly taught by Divine authority. This is a condition so essential, that without compliance with it, no degree of learning, nor any amount of labor can render the Scriptures intelligible or salutary.

SECTION III.

REVERENCE FOR THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD.

We here assume, without pausing to state the evidence upon which the assumption rests, that the Bible was given by Divine inspiration ;—that holy men wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, and that as a whole, and in all its subordinate parts, it is the word of God—of Him who made the world,—of Him in whom we live, and move, and have our being.*

Is it necessary to say, that we should read such a book with the deepest reverence and awe ? If God should speak to us directly out of heaven, as he did to the Patriarchs and Prophets of the old world, should we not listen with profound self-abasement ? But the Bible is his word ; and though it is a still small voice amidst the noisy excitements of the world, yet it is clothed with his majesty and authority, and man should bow with the deepest prostration of soul before it. As Elijah in

* See Inspiration of the Bible.

the cave of Horeb wrapped his face in his mantle when he heard the voice of God—as Moses went up into the mount with fear and trembling to receive the Law from the hand of God;—as the High Priest, not without blood which he offered for himself and the errors of the people, Heb. 9: 7; went into the mysterious Holy of Holies, where the visible emblem of Jehovah's presence blazed upon the mercy seat, to consult the Divine oracle in behalf of a sinful nation, so we should open the Bible, and read the wonderful things which God has caused to be written for our guidance in this wilderness of life. That levity of soul, that feeling of self-sufficiency, that tendency to handle the word of life as a common thing, which characterizes so many at the present day, even in the church, is fatal to progress in Divine knowledge. The truth will not make its appropriate impression upon an irreverent mind; nay, God will hide himself in anger from those who treat him as an equal. It is only when like the prophet, we feel humbled

in the dust before the resplendant glories of the Divine word, that a coal from the altar touches our lips, and our minds are filled with a Divine radiance which makes all truth plain.

SECTION IV.

SUBMISSION TO THE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES.

In reading the Bible we should ever keep in mind that the sacred writers profess to spread before us, not the results of their own study and learning, but the manifold and infallible wisdom of God, and demand of all their readers, what no human author can consistently claim, the entire and cheerful surrender of the understanding, heart, and will, to their teaching.

This deference to the authority of the written word, is every where in the Scriptures stated as one of the essential conditions of a clear and saving knowledge of Divine things, and the progress of the work of religion in the soul. "Unless ye be con-

verted," says the Saviour, "and become as little children, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." Matt. 18: 3.

The light of revelation becomes darkness to those who are determined to follow their own will and have their own way, while a childlike, submissive disposition, a willingness to yield all the powers of the soul to the wise and holy authority of our great Teacher, opens the mind to understand the wonderful things of God, dissipates the clouds which cover the truth, enables the inquirer to see a Divine beauty even in those passages, which, to the merely learned, appear obscure and perplexing, and fills the mind with a celestial peace in doing the will of God.

It is a fact which every day's observation illustrates and confirms, that those who have made the greatest attainments in Divine knowledge, and are most distinguished for their success in teaching and defending the great doctrines of the Bible, are those, who, to great industry and a persevering diligence, have united the pro-

foundest humility, and submission to Divine authority, who do not sit in judgment upon the word, but are willing to be judged by it; who feel no confidence in any human opinion that contradicts the sacred oracles; who sacrifice pride, and self-will, and an erring reason upon the altar of faith; and are not ashamed to become fools in the estimation of the world, that they may be wise unto salvation.

This submission of the whole mind to the authority of the Bible, is obviously demanded by our natural weakness and ignorance, as well as by the nature of that revelation which has been sent to enlighten us. It is indeed the only proper state of man in presence of the Bible. But reasonable and necessary as it is, the natural pride of man, who would be as gods, knowing good and evil without light from above, struggles violently against it, and impudently asks, "Who is Lord over us?"

We find this unwillingness to submit to the authority of the Scriptures, not only among those who have doubts of their

Divine origin, but sometimes even among those who regard them as the word of God, and profess to take them for their guide. Without directly and openly rebelling against the light, they permit themselves to cavil at many plain declarations, to judge of the propriety of the Divine arrangements, to approve or disapprove according to their taste and judgment, to speak of the Bible much as they do of mere human compositions, and, in a word, to treat God, revealing himself in his word, as they would not suffer a child or a servant to treat them. This state of feeling, more inconsistent than the open contempt of infidels, who in trampling the Bible under foot, endeavor to convince themselves that it is the work of sinful and erring men, has been the fruitful source of many of those errors, both speculative and practical, which have exerted so pernicious an influence upon the church and the world.

Every reader ought at once to settle the question, whether the Bible is dictated by the Spirit of God, and sent to him as a

guide, or whether it is the work of man. If it is a mere human composition, reject its authority in matters of religion; rely upon reason and philosophy; mark out a course for yourself, and like the young ruler, turn away from Christ, to find your happiness among the beggarly elements of the world; confine your thoughts and affections to the present life, and give up the hopes, the consolation, the blessed immortality, which the gospel offers to man.

But if you cannot thus reject the Bible, with all its infinite blessings, then be consistent: submit to it as your master, abjure that spirit of independence and insubordination which is so natural to the human heart, prostrate yourself before this Divine Teacher, and receive with meekness and humility the ingrafted word which is able to save your souls. Then you may hope to "know of the doctrine," and be led into all truth.

SECTION V.

PREPARATION FOR READING.

In order to gain clear and satisfactory views of the subjects presented in the Bible, there should be some previous preparation for reading.

It is the practice of too many who feel that the study of the Scriptures cannot be safely dispensed with, to snatch a moment amidst the distracting cares or follies of the world, and rush into the presence of Jehovah, as the horse rusheth into the battle. This is as fatal to success in study, as it is irreverent towards God.

We ought to take pains to place the mind in the best possible condition to see and receive the truth. We should suspend all other occupations, and lay aside all the cares and business by which our attention is liable to be diverted from the things of religion, and seek a place of stillness and seclusion, where we may listen undisturbed to the voice that speaks from heaven. We

should consider for a moment our need of this revelation, and who it is that undertakes to be our guide amidst the doubts and errors of life, calling upon our souls and all that is within us, to praise him for the unspeakable gift of this book. We should collect our scattered thoughts, and recall our wandering affections, and repress the worldly desires that agitate the soul, and endeavor to secure a season of entire calmness and serenity.

He that prays, says an eloquent writer, with a troubled and discomposed spirit, is like one that retires into a battle to meditate, and sets up his closet in the out quarters of an army, and chooses a frontier garrison to be wise in.

We may say the same of a man who attempts to read the Bible with a divided and distracted mind. How can he understand what he reads? As the lake reflects the objects above and around it only when it is unbroken by waves, so truth is mirrored in the soul only when we are free from excitement and disturbance; and the

lessons of heavenly wisdom, the touching narratives, the sublime doctrines, the beautiful examples of piety, the holy precepts, the many exceeding great and precious promises, the awful threatenings, which render the Bible the most wonderful and interesting of books, so far from transforming us into the image of the heavenly, will make but a confused and imperfect impression, and may even bewilder and mislead us.

SECTION VI.

PATIENCE AND PERSEVERANCE IN READING.

The Bible cannot be understood by those who are unwilling to make it the daily subject of study and investigation. It is a profound book. It contains the manifold wisdom of God, and must not be dismissed with a hasty and superficial reading. We should consider the reading of the Bible as one of the most important and imperative duties of life, and assign to this work a certain and a sufficient share of time, which

nothing shall be permitted to interfere with. We should read often, and continuously, and diligently, with a patience which no difficulties can weary, and with a perseverance which will be satisfied with nothing short of a comprehensive knowledge of the whole revealed will of God.

If you do not read in this manner, you cannot become familiar with the numerous historical facts that throw light upon the character of God and the condition of men. You will not retain in the memory the important doctrines which are revealed as the foundation of human hope. You will not see the true relation between the different parts of this sublime system of grace. You will not find those precious pearls which lie in the deep ocean of truth. You will never be in a condition to explain or modify one part of the Bible by allusions contained in other places, nor be able to perceive the wonderful harmony that exists between the word and the works of God.

It is one of the most obvious and ominous characteristics of the religious world at the

present day, that men are impatient of profound and continued thought, of systematic and thorough investigation, of laborious searching after Divine knowledge, and too easily satisfied with an infrequent and superficial glance at the mysteries of redemption. Even after men have tasted the good word of Gód, and felt the power of the world to come, there is a continual tendency to relax their efforts, to free themselves from the wearisome duty of study, to waste their time in easy and profitless reading, to make religion a pastime rather than the work of life, and to take all their knowledge of Christian doctrine at second hand. With such habits nothing but erroneous, or at best the most superficial and feeble views of truth can be expected; and instead of being rooted and built up in Christ, and established in the faith, we shall ever be children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive. Eph. 4: 14.

SECTION VII.

EARNEST DESIRE TO KNOW THE TRUTH.

We should read the Bible with a sincere and earnest desire to understand the revelation which is there made to us, so far at least, as is essential to our salvation, and the safe instruction of all whose spiritual illumination we are bound to seek.

A deep desire to obtain clear and adequate views, and to make sure and rapid progress in useful knowledge, is universally regarded as essential to eminence in any science, and he who reads or hears with a listless and careless mind, is always expected to be ever learning, without arriving at any satisfactory knowledge of the truth that he needs.

This is especially true in relation to religious studies. The Bible is sent into the world, not to amuse an idle hour, or to furnish subjects for vain speculation or fruitless debate, but as a revelation of Divine grace to perishing sinners. It brings light

for the intellect, and spiritual life for the soul. It speaks to us of another world, and solves the questions which most perplex and embarrass the human mind. Surely, to desire that we may understand the subjects thus miraculously spread before us,—that we may receive the celestial benefits so freely offered,—that we may realize the benevolent design of this revelation,—is most reasonable and necessary.

This state of mind has characterized all the eminent servants of God in all ages. See how vehemently David descried the light of Divine truth. "My soul breaketh for the longing that it hath unto thy judgments at all times." Ps. 119: 20. "As the heart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God." Ps. 42: 1. Let us feed our souls, says a Father of the Church, by the study of the Divine writings; let us satisfy our hunger and quench our thirst, by the heavenly meat and drink which they afford. "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled."

Math. 5: 6. A deep desire to understand and feel the converting force of truth, is therefore, one of the best interpreters of the word. Difficulties will vanish, obscure places will become plain, doubts will melt away, temptations will be baffled, and the word will become quick and powerful under the influence of this all engrossing passion. The experience of all who have made great attainments in Divine knowledge, proves and illustrates this.

But when we read, as probably by far the greater number do, with wandering minds, with languid feelings, with no definite aim or object, we shall experience none of the peculiar effects of the written word. It will be to us nothing more than a common book. We shall gather up, perhaps, a few fragments that lie upon the surface, and be enabled to talk fluently of some events recorded as it were in letters of fire, but we shall not comprehend the great design of the Bible; we shall have obscure views of the means which God employs to save sinners; the peculiar excellence and

power of the doctrines of grace as they stand related to the conscience and the heart, will be entirely lost to us ; and notwithstanding the infinite love manifested in the plan of redemption, and all our intellectual light, we shall remain in spiritual darkness and death.

SECTION VIII.

MEDITATION.

It is of great importance to the clear understanding of Divine truth, that we should make it the subject of constant and earnest meditation.

Some books, says Lord Bacon, are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be digested ; that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not with much curiosity, and some few to be read wholly, with diligence, attention and profound thought. In this small number stands, pre-eminently, the word of God. As the food which we receive from without

repairs our wasted energies, and sustains us in life, only when, by the common, but mysterious process of digestion, it is incorporated with our very substance, and becomes flesh of our flesh, so it will be to little purpose to read the Bible, whatever be our state of mind, unless we keep the truth ever present to our conscience and heart, and make it spirit and life to our souls, by constant thought and reflection.

We recognize this disposition to meditate upon the things of God, in all the most successful students of the Bible. Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law do they meditate day and night. *Psa. 1: 2.* "I meditate," says the Psalmist, "on all thy works; I muse on the work of thy hands;" *Psa. 143: 5,* "Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word." *Ps. 119: 48.* And it is one of the most striking peculiarities of the Bible, that the more you meditate upon it—the more steadily and earnestly you contemplate the subjects it reveals,—the more fully and clearly it unfolds its beauty, harmony, depth, and glory to the mind.

Take a single doctrine which at first seems obscure or incredible,—a historical event which, according to natural laws, appears impossible,—a precept which strikes you as unnecessary or oppressive,—an exhortation of which you feel no need,—and instead of passing over it as a hard saying which cannot be understood, and would be useless if ever so plain, make it the subject of serious and long continued reflection: contemplate it in all its original connections: consider its relations to your own heart and life: dwell upon it as a part of that revelation which was written expressly for your admonition and instruction, that you through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope; Rom. 15: 4; and it will soon unfold its meaning to your soul.

As by steadily and intently gazing into waters which at first appear dark and fathomless, you by degrees penetrate their depths, and see the lost jewel that lies at the bottom, so by dwelling with earnest meditation upon the deep things of God, light comes to the mental eye, and clearness to

the thoughts. A single passage thus studied, will reveal more of truth, and do more good to the soul, than whole books read with haste and not appropriated by meditation.

This should be our mental employment in those seasons which are least occupied and disturbed by the necessary business and calls of life. In the still morning, before the world awakes around us, demanding our attention, and troubling our thoughts;—in the evening, when the works of the day are over, and we are released from our bondage;—on the Sabbath, when God] commands us to rest from labor, that we may attend especially to the wants of the soul;—we should give our individual attention to some portion of Divine truth, and endeavor to find the treasure which is there hidden from the world. In such meditations we should feel the power of the world to come, and be penetrated and filled with the spirit and life of the Divine word.

SECTION IX.

DIVINE INFLUENCE.

As the Bible was written by inspiration of the Holy Ghost, and contains the deep things of God, we ought constantly to feel and acknowledge our need of Divine influence to make it the power of God unto our salvation.

Paul plants the good seed of the kingdom; Apollos waters it with eloquent appeals to the conscience and the heart; the mysterious wisdom which was ordained before the world unto our glory, 1 Cor. 2: 7, is spread before us, and we are required to read with all docility, attention and reverence; but God only can savingly illuminate the mind, and give us grace and strength to realize the great end of his revelations. With all our preparation, and all our efforts, if left to ourselves, the Bible will be a sealed book, and the labors of Prophets and Apostles will be vain, unless its Author becomes our Teacher, and fills

our minds with his celestial light. "For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the spirit of God." 1 Cor. 2: 11.

It was this Divine teaching that David prayed for with such impassioned earnestness whenever he read the sacred oracles. Ps. 119: 27, 33, 34. It was this that opened the understanding of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus, and made their hearts to burn within them, as they communed together concerning the things of Christ. Luke 24: 45. It was this that the Apostles waited for in constant supplication until the day of Pentecost, when they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues as the spirit gave them utterance. Acts. 1: 4. 2: 1—4. It was this that opened Lydia's heart, so that she attended to the things spoken by Paul, and embraced the gospel as the ground of her hope. Acts 16: 14. It was this that melted the hearts of the multitude to whom Peter preached, and convinced them that

the man whom they had wickedly crucified, was both Lord and Christ. Acts 2: 37. It is this which now guides the people of God into all truth, and gives them a certainty of knowledge which no study or argument could produce.

That this Divine aid, which is so indispensable, may be enjoyed by all who are convinced of their need of it, might be reasonably inferred from the character of God, and from the obvious design of the revelation he has given us. He has in great mercy given us the Bible, to guide our feet in the way of peace. It was written to be understood and embraced as the man of our counsel. And can we suppose, that, having given us so much, he will withhold that gracious influence which is necessary to realize his own design? Will he not be the finisher as he is the author of our faith, and confirm the souls of those who follow on to know the Lord? What prayers can be so acceptable to him as prayers for enlightening grace? If he hears his children when they ask for bread, will he shut his ears when they ask for knowledge?

But we are not obliged to rest upon mere inference in respect to the bestowment of this Divine gift. It was referred to by the Prophets, as the great distinguishing blessing of the gospel dispensation. Isa. 54: 13. Ezek. 36: 27. It is promised by the inspired Apostles. Acts 2: 38, 39. It is the heavenly teaching which the Saviour encouraged all his disciples to expect as the result of his ascension into heaven, and his intercession before the mercy seat. John 16: 6, 7; 14: 26.

The condition upon which any inquirer after truth, may enjoy the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is earnest believing prayer, prompted by a sense of personal weakness and dependance. "Ask," says the Saviour, "and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? and if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a

serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children; how much more shall your heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him." Luke 11: 9—13. Happy is the man who experiences the fulfillment of this precious promise. To him the word is clear, quick, and powerful. He is filled with the knowledge of the Divine will, in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. Col. 1: 9. He is a child of God and a joint heir with Jesus Christ to the eternal inheritance promised in the Bible. Rom. 8: 14, 17. He has a comforter in all his trouble, and a safe guide in all his investigations; and though he is not infallibly preserved from every error, he is sure of knowing all things essential to salvation. He has the additional satisfaction of being able to help others in their inquiries, and thus of being a co-worker with God in spreading abroad a knowledge of his salvation.

Probably no one who reads this book, will deny or doubt the truth of this doc-

trine respecting the necessity and sufficiency of Divine influence in the reading of the Bible. But while we acknowledge that every good and perfect gift comes from God, and that if any man will ask for wisdom it will be liberally given, we are often exceedingly remiss in seeking what is so important. There is in all minds a natural tendency to turn away from him who speaks from heaven, and to rely with a vain confidence upon human wisdom and learning; thus seeking the living among the dead. We in this age of theoretical and practical infidelity, are in peculiar danger of being spoiled by philosophy and vain deceit, of preferring the inventions of man to the offered aid of God, and thus, of grieving away the spirit of truth, whose influence alone can produce in the soul the blessed assurance of faith and of hope.

Let us steadfastly resist this tendency of our own minds, this pride of reason, which causes so many to err from the way of peace. Let us learn to distrust ourselves

and, acknowledging our need of a Teacher from heaven, cast ourselves unreservedly into the hands of God to be taught, sanctified, and saved by his all-sufficient grace. We need not fear that he will leave us in darkness. The love that provided an infinite sacrifice to redeem us from guilt, which caused the Bible to be written for our learning and comfort, which invites us to come to the Lamb of God for eternal life, will doubtless show us the way, and make us wise unto salvation.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE DIFFICULTIES TO BE ENCOUNTERED IN THE STUDY OF THE BIBLE.

It is a favorite doctrine of the Roman Catholics, that the Bible is so obscure and difficult to be understood, that it is not only useless, but dangerous for the common people to read it for themselves, and therefore that they must receive with implicit faith the interpretations of Christian doctrine, alledged to be infallible, which are furnished by their church.

We cannot admit the truth of this representation respecting the utter obscurity of the sacred Scriptures, and the arrogant claim founded upon it, without directly denying many very intelligible passages of the word of God, and the testimony of thousands who have made it the man of their counsel, and found it to be spirit and life to their souls.

The Bible itself claims to be a plain and

sufficient guide to all who will come to it for instruction, in a proper state of mind. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." 2 Tim. 3: 16, 17. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." "The entrance of thy word giveth light." Ps. 119: 105, 130. "To them which sat in the region and shadow of death, light is sprung up." Math. 4: 16. Now to talk of a teacher that cannot be understood by those who desire to be instructed, and of a light that cannot be seen by all who have eyes, would be an absurdity which we dare not charge upon inspired men.

The Scriptures, therefore, we maintain, are in general plain and easy to be understood, in respect to all things pertaining to the duty and salvation of man; so that all who enjoy the light of reason, and will make suitable efforts, may understand

every thing contained therein which it is important for them to know.

At the same time it is not to be denied that there are portions of the Bible which the most diligent students may find embarrassing, and which the indolent may plead as an excuse for unbelief or disobedience in respect to the whole revelation. The Apostle Peter, referring to Paul's Epistles, says, that there are some things in them that are hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. 2 Peter 3: 16. This ought not to surprise nor discourage us. No human work ever was, or can be so written as not to be more or less obscure to many readers. And how was it possible for God to give us a revelation in human language, without passages which must ever be difficult of interpretation?

It is highly important that every reader of the Bible should be fully aware, not only of the existence, but of the nature and source of these difficulties, so that he may

be prepared by a suitable mental and moral discipline to meet them wisely and safely.

We shall find by a patient and careful examination, that a very considerable portion of the obscurity about which so much is said, is to be attributed to the human mind, and not to any fault in the Bible itself.

A book may in all respects be perfect, clear, intelligible, in itself, and yet the reader may be incapable of understanding it in consequence of some *moral* defect. The Bible is obscure to many by reason of the deep spiritual darkness in which sin has shrouded their minds. "If our Gospel is hid," says the Apostle, "it is hid to them that are lost, in whom the God of this world hath blinded the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ should shine unto them." 2 Cor. 4: 3, 4. In this case, men either see nothing, or see every thing discolored and distorted by the prevailing corruption of their hearts, so that the most certain and necessary truths

are no better than falsehood or foolishness. 1 Cor. 2 : 14. The Bible is not to blame for this. The language in which the essential doctrines of the Gospel are revealed, is clear enough ; and those passages which are the most fatally misunderstood and perverted, are, in themselves, among the plainest. The word is a lamp, and the law is a light, but the darkness does not comprehend it. John 1 : 5.

We have already spoken of the blinding influence which a corrupt heart exerts over the understanding ; and shall only say here, that the difficulty which a 'carnal and worldly man experiences in reading the Bible, cannot be removed by making any change in the statement of the doctrines of grace and the conditions of salvation. They are revealed in language peculiarly simple, perspicuous, and popular, evidently designed to commend them to the conscience of every man, whatever be his mental acquirements ; and no conceivable mode of communicating them, would render them

any more intelligible to a certain class of readers. The darkness in which the blind are enveloped, cannot be dispelled by increasing the intensity of the light that shines upon them, but by removing the physical impediment which prevents them from seeing it. So the only way in which the Bible, as a revelation of the way of salvation, can be rendered luminous to men immersed in sin, and alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart, Eph. 4: 18, is to take away the veil from within, and give them a spiritual discernment of the truth which they hate. This, as has been said, is the work of Him who gave the revelation, and not of any human teacher; and they who really desire to see the truth as it is in Jesus, and enjoy the freedom and peace which it is adapted to impart to the soul, must pray earnestly, like the blind man who sat by the way side begging, that the eyes of their understanding may be enlightened, and

that all moral obstructions to the entrance of the true light, may be taken away.

There are difficulties of another kind, which imply no guilt, and the removal of which depends upon intellectual efforts, that all persons may expect to meet in reading the Scriptures. A book perfectly clear and intelligible in itself, may be obscure or unintelligible through some *intellectual* deficiency in the reader.

Every writer reasonably supposes his readers to have a certain amount of knowledge respecting the subjects upon which he treats, and to have sufficient capacity to see the pertinency of his proofs and illustrations. No one can be expected to furnish understanding, as well as information. What obscurity do we find in the most able and perfect works, in consequence of ignorance of many things absolutely necessary to be previously known, but which those works were not designed to teach. A farmer, who understands well enough the common practical parts of his business, but who knows nothing of chemistry, geology,

or botany, would be exceedingly perplexed and bewildered in reading some profound work upon agriculture.

So portions of the Bible may be, and actually are unintelligible to many persons, in consequence of their ignorance respecting history, geography, natural philosophy, manners, customs, religious rites, &c., under which they unfortunately labor. This defect, the Bible itself cannot supply. It stands before us as an ancient monument, upon which is inscribed the history of events that occurred in distant countries, in times far remote, among a people of strange speech, and customs different from our own: and while the great facts and truths which all ought to know, and which all must know in order to be saved, are written so plainly that he who runs may read, and every one may understand, many things must necessarily be unintelligible to those who have no acquaintance with the times and circumstances in which they were recorded.

For the knowledge of those external

facts, which are necessary to a clear understanding of all parts of the Bible, but which the Bible itself does not furnish, we must consult those who have made these things their study, and accept the aid, which in the good providence of God, is at the present day afforded to all who desire it. They who are really in earnest to explore the Scriptures thoroughly, will not suffer themselves to be arrested in their studies by difficulties of this kind. They will not be too proud to confess their ignorance to those who are able to teach them. What they cannot find for themselves in the Bible, they will be glad to have explained by those who have more light. They will go to their Pastor, or Teacher, or have recourse to some of those excellent commentaries upon the Bible, which are happily so cheap, and easy to be procured. If any one will not do this, it is very inconsistent for him to complain that the Bible is unintelligible, or bring forward those difficult passages which he is too proud or too indolent to study in the proper

manner, as reasons for neglecting those parts, the meaning and design of which, with all his ignorance, he perfectly understands.

There are difficulties of another kind still. The language of the Bible, in many places, is rendered obscure in various ways. By the great difference, as has been said, between the manners, customs, habits of thought &c., of the people among whom it originated, and those with which we are familiar. By the great length of time which has elapsed since the commencement of revelation, during which, many monuments and documents, necessary to the full elucidation of historical, genealogical, and chronological passages, have been swept away. By the extreme brevity of many of the historical details, the history of a thousand years being sometimes compressed into a few pages. By the use of words, which at the time of the composition, or translation, were sufficiently intelligible, but which have long since become obsolete, and are

now understood only by those who make languages their proper study. 2 Cor. 8 : 1. By the introduction of phrases taken from the language of courts, which is not familiar to the common people. Gen. 41 : 45. By the use of ambiguous words, which are capable of more than one signification. e. g. "voice," Acts 9 : 7, with Acts 22 : 9. "Fire," Psa. 18 : 8. Deut. 4 : 24. "Power," 1 Cor. 11 : 10. By the use of abstract words for concrete : "circumcision." Rom. 3 : 30. By the manner in which names are applied, sometimes the same name being given to several persons, or places, as Pharaoh, Herod, Cæsar, &c. Sometimes the same person or place having several names, Acts 15 : 37. Col. 4 : 10. Sometimes appellatives being used for proper names, and the contrary. By the use of expressions peculiar to a foreign language, which have their origin in the customs and habits of a people, rather than in analogy or rules of grammar. Is. 3 : 1. By sentences in which the natural order of the words is inverted, or otherwise involved. By collecting many

thoughts and allusions in one sentence, as is frequently the practice of Paul. Rom. 1 : 1-7. Eph. 3 : 1-12. Col. 1 : 3.

We may also find difficulty in the general style and form of a discourse. Sometimes the sacred writers express their thoughts with a brevity that is exceedingly perplexing to many readers. Sometimes they clothe their ideas in the gorgeous and dazzling drapery of the most sublime poetry. The Prophets generally speak of things which we should suppose might be delivered in a plain and familiar style, in a diction at once copious, figurative, sublime, and difficult.

There is no style or mode of writing, indeed, which does not present more or less of difficulty to the inexperienced. Even the simplest historical statements, in which the writer takes especial pains to be clear, frequently occasion considerable perplexity not merely to the ignorant, but to the more intelligent.

All the difficulties of this kind may be overcome by a thorough and systematic

study of the Divine oracles, with the diligent use of appropriate helps. A strong desire to discover the meaning of every passage, earnest attention, comparison of Scripture with Scripture, perseverance in reading, a willingness to be taught, and that love of truth which will not be satisfied with partial knowledge of any subject, will enlarge the sphere of thought and render most parts of the Bible sufficiently plain.

But if after all your efforts, there should remain passages which cannot be interpreted with confidence, and difficulties of language which you cannot solve, do not exaggerate them into fatal obstacles to your progress. It is better no doubt to understand a text than to be in doubt respecting its meaning, and a clear idea is more agreeable than a confused notion of any thing; but your true progress does not depend upon minute knowledge of ancient history, or chronology. There is nothing essential to your salvation taught in those obscure places, which may not be found

stated with perfect clearness in other passages. The Bible is full of light, and a common diligence will save you from essential error. It is vain and sinful to urge a difficulty which grows out of some peculiarity of style, as an objection to passages that are perfectly plain, and to resist the pressure of known truth, on the ground that you cannot remove every shade of obscurity from the pages of the Bible.

Be more just to the Bible, and more honest towards yourselves. To the minute difficulties which originate in the form in which revelation is given, oppose the grand and sublime truths which shine forth with convincing and overwhelming splendor from every page. Treat the Bible as you do the sun, which we are told has a few spots upon his fiery disk; walk in the light, and rejoice in its cheering warmth, and do not envelope yourselves in an artificial night, because you cannot remove these minute difficulties, which in respect to what is plain, are as nothing.

There are other difficulties, we acknowledge, the solution of which is beyond the power of man. The Bible, in some respects, is a mysterious and wonderful book. It contains many prophetic declarations, and descriptions, which belong to the remote future, and cannot be explained except by the events to which they refer. It contains many mysteries, which although stated in the simplest forms of speech, cannot be comprehended by a finite mind. We ought not to be offended to find such things in the Bible, nor turn away from it as unworthy of our attention, because it has its unintelligible side.

Is it not so in all the works of God? What part of this glorious universe is there that is not mysterious? Those things that are the most familiar, are often the most difficult to explain. The flowers that bloom beneath your window, and the grass that clothes the fields with verdure, are wonderful in their simple beauty. Natural religion is full of mystery. The creation of the world, within a given period,

or eternal creation ;—The origin of evil ;—the reciprocal influence of spirit and matter in man ;—the fearful problem of human existence ;—all these subjects involve difficulties which no human intellect can explain.

And shall we demand that the volume of inspiration, which speaks to us of God and Divine things, shall contain nothing which surpasses our finite powers? Shall we make it a condition of faith that every thing here shall be perfectly intelligible? If this were the prominent characteristic of the Bible, we should have a more fatal objection to its Divine origin than is drawn from its mysteries. We should at once say, This book cannot be Divine because it is not in harmony with the other works of God ; it is level to the capacity of man, and therefore to be regarded as a human production. We miss here the superscription of God, and cannot receive this as his work. The mysteries of the Bible, therefore, instead of being obstacles to faith, are themselves a part of that evidence by which we recognize it as Divine.

Nor are they useless in the economy of grace. It manifests a narrow view of revelation to maintain that we are benefitted only by that which we fully comprehend. Does not that which we know, in all cases, rest upon that which we do not know, as its basis and support. The plain truths which we understand and love, derive all their influence from that unknown region whose infinite and eternal light gleams out here and there in the pages of the Bible.

Besides, those mysterious passages, before which the ignorant and the learned are equal, exert a direct beneficial influence over the mind. They serve to repress the daring pride which says with Lucifer, son of the morning, "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, I will ascend above the height of the clouds, I will be like the Most High." Is. 14: 13. They admonish us of the weakness of the human intellect, and excite us to seek by prayer for the teaching of that spirit that can alone lead us into all truth. They quicken us to that diligence in

reading and study, which, though it can never render us familiar with all the deep things of God, will nevertheless make us wise unto salvation. They elevate the soul by their solemn grandeur, and awaken within us an unspeakable longing for that time, when freed from the burden of the flesh, and the darkness of our prison, we shall see as we are seen, and know even as we are known.

CHAPTER III.

ON FALSE PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION.

HAVING shown in what state of mind the Bible is to be read, and pointed out the nature and source of the difficulties which we may expect to meet in our reading; we come now to inquire whether there is any general principle or rule of interpretation, which will guide the reader safely in those places where a variety of explanations is possible, and by which the clashing opinions of men, especially in respect to things pertaining to salvation, may be tried.

That there is such a principle or rule, the application of which, as a touch-stone, will discover the true sense of Scripture, so far at least as is necessary to prevent all essential error, and enable the diligent reader to understand all that it is important for him to know, we cannot doubt: but all parties do not agree as to what and where this rule is.

SECTION I.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH.

The Roman Catholics think that they find an infallible rule in the authority of a visible court or tribunal upon earth, that is, the Pope and his Cardinals, whom, it is asserted, God has especially commissioned to interpret the Bible in his name; to which they add the decisions of general councils, which we are told, are incapable of error, and certain unwritten traditions, supposed to have been transmitted to us through a regular succession of Divinely commissioned ministers, the first of whom were taught by the Apostles themselves.

As Protestants, we reject this assumption, by any body of men, of Divine authority to interpret the Bible for the world, and whose opinions must be received without question, as at once unfounded, presumptuous, derogatory to the character of the sacred writers, dishonorable to Christ, and dangerous to the souls of men: un-

founded, because the Bible claims to be, of itself, sufficient to make the man of God perfect, and to fit him for all good works; presumptuous, because it claims for man the attributes of the Divine author of the Scriptures, so that he, as God, would sit in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God; 2 Thess. 2: 4; derogatory to the character of the sacred writers, because it represents those who were commissioned to reveal the whole will of God concerning us, and to complete the canon, as having failed of accomplishing the work assigned them; dangerous, because it takes the word of God from the people for whom it was expressly written, and substitutes an irresponsible teacher who may impose what doctrines, and make what conditions of pardon he pleases; and dishonorable to Christ, because it places a visible head over the church, instead of Him who redeemed us, and promised to give us his spirit to guide us into all truth.

At the same time, we are careful not to deny the high importance of the Divinely

instituted ministry, or the value of solemn decisions made by councils regularly convened, or the utility of the ancient fathers and other learned and pious doctors of the church.

We receive, honor, and use all these helps in the interpretation of the Scriptures. We have no sympathy with those who would sweep away all these gifts of God as nothing worth, and rely upon their own unaided private judgment, to solve all those great questions in relation to which, even the angels, we are told, are made wiser by the church. We remember with affection and suitable reverence those "who have the rule over us, who have spoken to us the word of God, and who watch for our souls as those who must give account." Heb. 13 : 7, 17. We submit with all necessary deference to the Pastors and Teachers which the Head of the church has given "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ," and whose great

object is to bring all "in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Eph. 4: 11-13. For to set aside these auxiliaries in the arduous work of studying the oracles of God, would be no less preposterous, irreverent, presumptuous, and dangerous, than the conduct of those who deny altogether the right of private judgment, and strive to bring the people to a blind and servile obedience to the self-styled successors of the Apostles. Thus pursuing the course plainly marked out for us in the Bible,—using with diligence and gratitude all the helps which have been graciously provided for us in the ministry, and ordinances of the Gospel, for the acquisition of religious knowledge, and at the same time maintaining unimpaired that spiritual liberty with which Christ has made us free,—we are likely to avoid the Sylla and Charybdis of theological peril, upon which so many have been wrecked, and attain to

a satisfactory and saving knowledge of Divine things.*

SECTION II.

THE INWARD LIGHT.

There are others who think that they find the only rule of interpretation in a certain inward light, or direct, irresistible, and infallible teaching of the Holy Spirit, which does not permit any doubt or error in respect to Christian doctrine, to remain in the mind, and gives Divine authority to its possessor to explain the Bible to his fellow men.

It is doubtless the doctrine of the Scriptures, that the aid of the Spirit who dictated the written word, is necessary to enable us to understand and to embrace the truth therein revealed; and we earn-

* For a further discussion of this point, we refer our readers to the "THE READING OF THE BIBLE," recently published by the Mass. S. S. Society, in which the Protestant doctrine is very fully and ably developed.

estly maintain this doctrine against all who would exclude Divine influence from the completed Bible, as they would God from the works of creation, and trust entirely to their own sagacity to understand the Scriptures.

This influence of the Holy Spirit is the greatest privilege and blessing of the children of God. Without it we are bewildered wanderers in a strange world, for "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." Rom. 8: 9. This influence is expressly promised to all who ask for it in a proper manner, and we are commanded to ask that we may receive it.

But by the Holy Ghost promised to all believers, we are evidently not to understand immediate Divine inspiration.

The great object of inspiration was to make certain chosen individuals the infallible teachers of the world, in the place of direct communication from God. It was confined to the writers of the Bible, and unquestionably ceased when the canon of Scripture was completed.

We are not, therefore, to expect the renewal of this gift, unless God has a new revelation to make, and then we should not be bound to receive any one as a Teacher sent directly from God, unless he should bring all the miraculous proofs which the Apostles exhibited as the signs of their Divine mission.

We deem it proper to dwell for a moment upon this pretended rule of interpretation, because in all ages of Christianity, multitudes have professed to be especially raised up, and qualified by extraordinary Divine illumination, for the great work of more fully revealing the will of God to men; and strange as it may seem, their claims have been admitted, not only by the ignorant, but even by many who have not had the excuse of mental imbecility to palliate their errors.

This fanatical and absurd pretence to extraordinary illumination, originates, like the Roman Catholic doctrine, in the denial of the perfection and sufficiency of the Scriptures, and leads to as dangerous re-

sults. It transfers the gift of infallibility from the church, to individual members, and sets up an authority over the conscience, which acknowledges no responsibility, and allows of no appeal. It silences the Bible, that man may utter the dreams of his disordered imagination, or makes it utter the incoherent ravings of insanity. It imposes upon men the wildest opinions as essential to salvation, and requires implicit obedience upon pain of exclusion from the pale of the true church and from the favor of God.

And when a man is believed to be inspired by his deluded followers, the voice of God, speaking in the Bible is utterly unheeded. New doctrines in direct opposition to those most obviously taught by the sacred writers, are greedily received. The most extravagant and foolish interpretations are received as palpable truth. Practices condemned and anathematized by Christ and his Apostles, are adopted and justified. A slight acquaintance with Ecclesiastical history, or even with some recent

developments in our own age and country, will show what frightful evils naturally flow from this groundless claim to immediate Divine teaching.

While, therefore, we thankfully embrace the doctrine that every sincere inquirer may hope for spiritual assistance in his efforts to obtain clear views of what is revealed, we reject with abhorrence all pretences to immediate Divine inspiration, and make the WRITTEN WORD, interpreted with such helps, as we are furnished with in the ministry, and in the Bible itself, the man of our counsel, and our guide to eternal life.

SECTION III.

HUMAN REASON.

Some think that they find an infallible rule of interpretation in the dictates of human reason.

As we hear much said respecting the use

and supremacy of reason in the study and explanation of Divine truth, it may be proper to dwell for a few moments upon this point.

What is this reason which is to be made a judge and divider over the word of God?

By reason, we understand that natural faculty of the soul by which we perceive, apprehend, and judge of things according to certain axioms which are supposed to be so self-evident that no sane man can deny their truth, or believe any thing which contradicts them.

Now we acknowledge that this light of reason is, like the Bible, a Divine gift, for the spirit of man, says the sacred writer, is the candle of the Lord. Prov. 20 : 27. And far be it from us to reject its use in the study and interpretation of the Scriptures; for it would be as absurd to suppose that men could see the things of God without this eye of the soul, as that we could judge of outward objects without the use of the physical eye. It is appropriately employed in examining the evidence by which the authenticity of

the sacred text, and the Divine authority of the Scriptures, are proved;—in arranging, combining, and digesting the subjects of revelation into a compact body and system of religious truth; in the study of ancient languages, geography, chronology, history, philosophy; in reconciling apparent discrepancies which may be found in the Bible; in illustrating Divine revelation by the analogy of nature; and he who is most diligent in the study of these things, and makes the greatest proficiency in all sound learning and literature, other things being equal, will be the best expositor of the sacred oracles. Let reason, then, be duly honored, and have its place in the Divine economy.

Nevertheless, it cannot be recognized as the rule of interpretation, nor be allowed to sit as a supreme judge upon all the doctrines of revelation.

For in the first place, many of the subjects presented in the Bible are infinitely above the reach of the highest reason, and could never have been discovered by any human effort.

Here are things which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, and which never entered into the heart of man, until they were revealed to us by the Holy Spirit, 1 Cor. 2: 9, 10; things relating to the nature, attributes, and works of God,—to the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension of Christ—to the way of salvation provided for sinners,—to the miraculous events which were appealed to by the sacred writers as evidences of a Divine mission,—things which cannot be demonstrated nor disproved by abstract reasoning, or arguments drawn from any human science, and which can be believed only upon the testimony of the Bible itself.

What can reason do in respect to matters thus obviously beyond its depth, and incapable of any scientific examination, but to satisfy itself by evidence which it is competent to examine, that the Bible is the word of God, to inquire diligently, with all the helps that are within reach, not what the sacred writers, according to our view of the matter, ought to have said, but what, ac-

according to the obvious import of their language they meant to say, and so to interpret the different parts of the Bible, as that they shall not be made to contradict themselves?

If reason goes beyond this, and attempts to decide authoritatively upon subjects which it cannot comprehend, and the truth of which can be settled only by Divine testimony, there can be nothing but confusion and boundless error.

There are great evils, as has been said, resulting from the Roman Catholic doctrine of an infallible tribunal; and from a fanatical reliance upon immediate Divine inspiration, but the erection of finite and imperfect reason into an infallible standard of Divine truth, and the trial of revelation which is a work of God, by the measure of a man, is perhaps still more delusive and dangerous.

According to this view, every man, whatever be his mental capacity or acquirements, becomes, without the light of inspiration, or the collective wisdom of the church, the judge of all doctrines, and feels

able to understand all knowledge and all mysteries.

Of what authority or value are the sacred oracles in presence of this purblind judge? What weight has Divine testimony against the wild speculations of a mind that is incapable of fully understanding even those things that depend upon the evidence of the senses? Where shall the soul find a place of rest amidst the turbulent and rebellious reasonings of ignorance and pride? What harmony in respect to religious truth can there be in a world where every man would furnish from his own scanty knowledge a criterion of all doctrines?

The practical results of making reason a standard by which the written word shall be tried, are such as might have been expected. It has ever led to the denial of all statements in the Bible which involve any thing miraculous or mysterious, and to interpretations which reason itself would be ashamed of in any science but religion. "Professing themselves to be wise, men become fools." Rom. 1: 22. In ancient and in modern times the Bible has been

made the subject of the most irreverent and scandalous treatment. The most essential doctrines, without which the Christian religion would have no peculiar marks of Divinity, nor any saving influence, and whole books have been rejected, simply because they cannot be reconciled with the dictates of human reason: thus rendering the word of God of no effect, and closing the way of life to multitudes, who under the light of truth might have found refuge at the cross.

To what has been said in relation to the natural limitation and imperfection of human reason, we must add the declarations of Scripture and the teaching of experience in respect to its moral condition.

The judge of controversies, and the guide to all truth, should not only be able to see clearly all that is to be seen, but be in moral harmony with the Divine oracles. But so far is this from being the fact that this boasted reason is corrupt and perverse as well as half blind. It is naturally disposed to reject certain statements which

relate to the mode and terms of salvation, however clear and convincing the evidence of them may be. It is under the influence of worldly desires and passions to that degree, that if a voice from heaven should utter the doctrine of grace, its ingenuity would be tasked to discover some way of rendering them unintelligible, or contradictory.

Even in the regenerate man, reason is often clouded by prejudice, and weakened by remaining corruptions, and biassed by the influence of the flesh, as we see in the apostle Peter, who, although he had been long a disciple, and doubtless a subject of renewing grace, was, on one occasion so far misled by his selfish feelings, and so savored of the things of men rather than the things of God, that the Saviour called him Satan, and pronounced him a very dangerous adviser in relation to the sufferings of which he spoke. Math. 16 : 23.

Reason, then, must not be elevated into an infallible tribunal for the decision of all questions which pertain to our spiritual welfare. Its true place is with Mary at

the feet of Jesus. It must receive the truth that comes down from heaven, and not decide upon what it is proper for God to do, or what is necessary for man to believe. It must search the Scriptures for that eternal life which they profess to reveal. It must not make the consistency of any doctrine with personal feelings or long cherished views, a condition of faith, but subject every opinion and principle to the judgment of the word of God.

While reason thus humbles itself before the superior light of revelation, and strives to be merely a learner in the school of Christ, it will find every where helps in studying and illustrating Divine truth. Every faculty of the mind, and all the works of God, and all the treasures of science, will lend their aid in unfolding the sense of the sacred oracles; and under the influence of that spirit of wisdom who comes into a world of ignorance and error to minister to those who shall be heirs of salvation, its path will be that of the shining light, shining more and more unto the perfect day.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BIBLE ITS OWN INTERPRETER.

SINCE from what has been said it is evident that neither the authority of the church, nor the immediate inspiration of the Holy Ghost, nor the dictates of human reason, can be relied on as a rule of interpretation, it concerns us to inquire whether there is any general principle by which the common reader, who has access to few books, and who cannot devote himself to sacred criticism as a science, nor solve all the literary difficulties which occupy the attention of scholars, may be so guided and enlightened, that he shall not be in danger of losing sight of any essential truth, nor of adopting any opinion subversive of the faith once delivered to the saints.

It would be strange indeed if God, who has not left himself without witness in nature, which speaks to all hearts, and reveals his eternal power and Godhead to all

who have eyes to see, had given to the world a volume containing a higher revelation of his character and will, without at the same time furnishing some criterion by which all who are able to read it, may not only recognize it as his work, but, with suitable diligence, ascertain all those truths which are essential to the present and eternal peace of man. We find the principle that is needed in the following passage: "If any man prophecy," says the Apostle, "let him prophecy according to the proportion, (or analogy,) of faith." Rom. 12: 6. Where he obviously refers, not to the gift of foretelling future events, (for the prophets spoke according to immediate Divine inspiration,) but to the ordinary gift of explaining or interpreting the Scriptures, whether publicly or in the privacy of the family, which is a frequent meaning of the expression: and by faith he means, not the inward exercise of faith in the believer, (because this is liable to many infirmities and imperfections, and must itself be tried by the word, so that it cannot be a rule,)—

nor any confession of faith which a church may have adopted, (because this must be gathered from, and justified by, the Scriptures,) but the object of faith, that is, the Bible itself, which it is our duty to study and believe.

The great principle of interpretation, then, according to the Apostle, is to be found in the Scripture itself, and the whole volume is to be understood and explained by the light which shines from its own pages. In other words the Bible is its own interpreter, and is, of itself, able to make every reader wise unto salvation.

This principle is based upon the acknowledged fact, or rather the fact which every reader must acknowledge as the condition of his success, that the Scriptures, although consisting of many books, written by different persons, at periods far distant from each other, treating of an infinite variety of subjects, and embracing the biography of the world from its creation to the final consummation of all things, is nevertheless the work of one mind, forming a

beautiful and harmonious whole, like the works of nature, and manifesting one uniform, consistent, and holy purpose in which all men are equally interested, and which all may at once understand.

The Bible is of course its own interpreter in all those passages, by far the greater number, in which the mind of the Spirit is revealed with a clearness, which, like sunlight, is its own evidence, and can be proved by nothing plainer than itself: and if no other part of the sacred record could be in any way rendered intelligible, no one would fail of salvation through unavoidable ignorance of the truth. It is the combined splendor of these passages which makes the Bible like the sun, which, although it has a few mysterious spots that can be sometimes seen, sheds forth light enough for the whole world.

As to other places where some shade of obscurity rests upon the language or thought, and which may without care, be misunderstood or perverted, the Scriptures generally furnish the means of ascertaining the true

sense. Sometimes to a declaration, which, standing by itself, would be very obscure, perhaps altogether unintelligible, an explanation is soon subjoined, so that the reader, if he proceeds, feels but a slight transitory uneasiness. Difficult texts are frequently explained by comparing them with others in different parts of the Bible, which are analogous either in expression or thought.

A truth or doctrine wrapped up in parabolic phraseology, may be found elsewhere explicitly stated in a didactic form. Types find their full interpretation in their antetypes. And many passages which are full of a mysterious darkness in the Old Testament, are made luminous by the clearer revelation of the gospel.

Much light is thrown upon a difficult passage, by some knowledge of the character and life of the person whom the Holy Ghost employed to write it; by ascertaining whether the writer, in the place we are reading, speaks in his own person, or by a figure of speech, introduces another person, perhaps an objector, speaking in his stead;

by inquiring into the moral and political condition of the place and time in which he wrote so far as they are disclosed in the Bible; by forming a true notion of the nature and design of the particular dispensation, whether patriarchal, Mosaic, or Christian, to which the passage relates.

It also affords great help to the understanding of the Sacred writers to study attentively the form in which their thoughts are conveyed to us, whether history, poetry, prophecy, or doctrine.

In reading the histories with which the Bible abounds, and which renders it so attractive to all classes, it is always necessary to ascertain and keep in mind the immediate object and purpose of the narrative, so far as it may be learned from the book itself, or from other parts of Scripture. This will generally determine what may properly and safely be deduced from it as doctrine for our practical direction, and how it may be applied to the various circumstances of life. If we lose sight of this, we shall be in danger of rendering ancient

historical facts more or less significant in relation to present duty than they were designed to be, and thus of injuring, rather than promoting our religious interests.

The prophetical books are the most difficult portions of the Bible. The lofty poetical style in which they are written, the highly figurative expressions with which they abound, the enigmatical forms in which their ideas are wrapped up, and the want of intelligible measures of time, which was designed to prevent a premature interpretation, all serve to render them peculiarly mysterious and obscure.

There is no part of the sacred oracles which demand of the reader so much labor, intelligence, caution, piety, and humility, as this; no part which ignorance and fanaticism have used with such destructive power in the church; no part which they that are unstable have so frequently wrested to their own destruction.

The vain and presumptuous attempts in former and in later times to fix the precise period for the second coming of Christ and

the end of the world, from the mysterious numbers of Daniel and the Revelation, have always been, and in the nature of the case must always be exceedingly injurious to the interests of true religion and sound biblical learning.

Still, even the prophecies are not without their intelligible side, and may all minister to the edification and comfort of the church, if, as the Apostle says, of the law, they are used lawfully. If you study attentively the character, position, and especial mission of the prophet, the circumstances in which he was placed, and the history which is mingled with the predictions; if you search for the fulfillment of particular prophecies in events which subsequent inspired writers expressly declare to be their accomplishment; if you read profane history, in which Scripture prophecy is from time to time becoming realized, with care and much reflection; if you wait with patient expectation for the accomplishment of the whole series of prophetic revelations in the second coming of

the Son of Man, ever ready to meet him, like servants who are waiting for their lord in the faithful discharge of all present duty, light will break into your minds even from these cloudy portions of truth, and you will experience a continual increase of faith and zeal in the work of the Lord.

A very important help in reading any part of the Bible is the design, whether general or special, of the book or passage which you are studying. In reading any author we instinctively ask for what purpose he composed his work,—what general end he wished to promote by it,—what particular object he had in view in this or that passage ;—for no one is supposed to be at the pains of writing without some especial and definite object, which is the perpetual light and interpreter of his book.

The Bible is not an aimless book. It has one common end and object. All its parts, however apparently different in character, point to one path of life. All its voices, whether heard and understood by

the world, or not, proclaim one central truth. All its revelations are designed to make known one great purpose of God with respect to man. This cannot but be obvious to every thoughtful reader, and we are bound to keep this constantly in view in all our reading; for though every explanation of an obscure passage which may be consistent with this common purpose, may not be the true one in that case, yet evidently nothing that directly contradicts this can be taught by any inspired writer.

But every particular book, and even different portions of the same book, had their immediate origin in some peculiar circumstances of the times and people among whom the sacred writers lived, and were designed to accomplish a special purpose in connection with the general one, which must determine the meaning of many of his arguments and allusions.

What the especial object of every portion of the Bible may be, must be gathered from the express declaration of the writer, from

the state of the times and people, from references found in some other sacred book, or from the prevalence of some error or sin against which the passage is obviously directed.

Thus, a slight examination shows us that the whole economy and legislation of Moses, while it foreshadowed the great sacrifice and blessings of the gospel dispensation, was at the same time wisely adapted to the condition and wants of the Israelites, and was as useful to them as if it had no higher meaning; that all the Prophets, while they predicted the coming Messiah, and the future glory of the church, had many particular messages to persons then living, and important objects to promote in their own time; and that the Saviour and his Apostles, while they unfolded the great doctrines which are essential to salvation, were in constant conflict with persons, error, prejudices, customs, &c., that have long since passed away, and had many special ends to answer among their immediate hearers.

If we do not keep in mind this two-fold character of the sacred writings, and clearly distinguish between the particular and general objects they were designed to promote, we shall meet with great difficulty in every part of the Bible, and be liable to great practical errors, by separating important arguments, addresses, and precepts, from the circumstances which furnish the best guide to their meaning, and by applying them to subjects to which they have no reference.

Many of the practical directions, as well as arguments and expostulations of Christ and his Apostles, had primary relation to the condition and wants of christians in that age. Some were addressed particularly to the ministers of the Church as such; some were designed to instruct and encourage those who were persecuted; some had reference to times of peculiar peril; some were intended to prepare the hearers for a special work; some were adapted to the commencement of the christian dispensation, and had especial reference to the rela-

tion which it still sustained to Judaism; some contained instruction to those who were to plant churches and promulgate the gospel among the heathen.

Now if we attempt to apply all these directions and precepts to all persons, to every age of Christianity, to a state of society and of the church totally different from that in which they were given, to a personal condition, and personal duties, altogether unlike those of the persons originally addressed, we shall be led to very singular and very mischievous results. It is this general application of specific instructions and precepts, that induces many fanatical reformers to attempt the revival of modes of life which are either impracticable, or dangerous to the peace of society, and to adopt measures, ostensibly for the promotion of religion, which are either simply absurd, or when successful, cover the church with sackcloth.

While however we must beware of confounding the particular with the general design of the sacred writers, we must take

care not to fall into the error of supposing that any of those portions of the Bible which had a special adaptation to men in former times, are useless in the present condition of the church and of the world. All Scripture is profitable for doctrine, correction, reproof, and instruction in righteousness, and there is not a text, whatever might have been its immediate design, which is not adapted to give practical instruction and guidance to men in all ages.

If you first understand the special purpose of a passage, and its original application, you may find in it a specification of some general principle, or a limitation of some truth which is expressed indefinitely in other places, and learn how all men should act when they are internally or externally in the condition of those to whom it was first addressed. The most particular and personal direction of our Saviour to one of his disciples, or an address like that of Paul to Philemon, may perhaps become a test of our obedience, and a condition of eternal life.

But the great principle in which all others center,—the all-pervading light,—by which the Bible interprets itself to every thoughtful reader whatever may be his external advantages, and, amidst the ever fluctuating opinions of men effectually guards him from all hurtful error, is the ANALOGY OF DOCTRINE, or the reference of all parts of Scripture to its fundamental truths.

All means of ascertaining the sense of particular passages must be considered as subordinate to this. In all questions relating to verbal or historical criticism, such an interpretation is to be sought as shall accord with the ground principles of revealed religion; and although you may not, in every case, be able able to satisfy yourself as to what a particular text was actually intended to signify, yet no sense is to be attached to it that does violence to any great doctrine upon which the Christian system rests.

In reading a philosophical or scientific work, if we meet with passages which seem obscure, or are apparently susceptible of

several different explanations, all of which cannot be true, we naturally turn to the declared principles of the author, or of the school to which he professedly belongs, and endeavor to discover a sense which shall harmonize with them, since no sensible writer can be presumed to advance any thing, deliberately, which shall contradict his own system.

If we adopt this principle in relation to human authors, who are liable to err, and to contradict themselves in their own books, how much rather should we adhere to it in respect to the Bible, every part of which was dictated by the Holy Ghost, who could have permitted nothing to be inserted that, properly interpreted, can in any way conflict with the fundamental truths upon which our eternal welfare depends.

There may be some diversity of opinion in respect to the number of fundamental truths, some churches or individuals finding more, and others fewer which they call by this name; but that there are such

truths, that they are so clearly taught that all who read must necessarily recognize them, that they are perfectly harmonious among themselves, and that, together they form a standard by which all explanations of the different parts, are to be tried, no one can deny without giving up the Bible as a work of God.

The general criterion of fundamental and essential truths is, the absolute necessity of a doctrine to the very existence of the Christian system. The Bible was obviously given for the purpose of revealing to sinners the way of justification and acceptance with God. It is the charter of our salvation. Its great end and object is to provide a remedy for the evils of sin. Now whatever is essential to this great purpose, is fundamental truth. Whatever tends to destroy this, is fundamental error. You may doubt whether this or that doctrine, held by a particular denomination, is absolutely essential to the economy of grace. You might not be logically com-

pelled to renounce Christianity, if you were to reduce the number of such truths so far as to appear to all other Christians as bordering hard upon infidelity.

But there are some declarations in the Bible, so plain that the wayfaring man though a fool must hear and understand them, so evidently necessary that without them the whole system must fall to the ground as a baseless fabric, so related to the conscience and the heart, that no sect, or man, who reads the Bible, ever thinks of denying them, such as the existence of a God, from whom the blessings of salvation come,—the guilty condition of the human race which rendered Divine interposition necessary,—the sacrifice of Christ by which pardon is procured,—the freedom of man to accept or reject the offers of mercy,—the necessity of repentance and faith,—accountability to God for the manner in which we receive this Divine gift,—and others of a similar character.

These lie at the foundation of both the Old and New Testament. They involve

the very existence and validity of the whole Christian system. And they form an infallible standard of interpretation for all parts of the Bible. They are to be carried as a light into all the obscure places where inexperienced readers would be liable to err. They are to be employed in sweeping away the false criticisms by which the word of God is continually mutilated, and in confirming the explanations which, besides other marks of truth, are conformed to the analogy of faith. They are to be relied on in all our study of the laws, the history, the prophecies, the morality and the argumentation of the Bible.

Under their guidance no reader, who wishes to understand what he reads, can innocently remain ignorant of what he ought to know, or form opinions which would be subversive of the hope that is in him; for though every possible sense of a passage which conforms generally to the analogy of doctrine, may not be the precise one intended by the author, yet no sense, however apparently necessary

according to critical laws, which contradicts this, can be true, unless the only wise God has contradicted himself in his own book, and in doubtful passages has taught otherwise, than in places where he has expressly and most certainly declared his mind and will; which would be absurd to suppose.

Thus, as an example of the application of this principle, take that passage where the Apostle declares that he rejoices in his sufferings, and "fills up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ for his body's sake, which is the church." Col. 1: 24. This text is somewhat obscure to many readers in consequence of its peculiar phraseology, and might be misinterpreted if it were taken by itself.

Now suppose that any expositor, whether representing the so called infallible tribunal of the church, or those who profess to speak from an inward revelation, or the mere verbal critic, who judges of all things according to the letter, should tell you that by the sufferings of Christ which Paul en-

dured, are to be understood, vicarious sufferings, such as those which Christ endured for the redemption of the world; and from thence deduce the doctrine that self-inflicted tortures are as necessary and as available in the work of salvation, as the crucifixion of Christ.

Without being able to determine just what, and all that the Apostle meant to imply by those words, you could say positively and without danger of error, that this exposition, though given by an angel from heaven, is indubitably false because it is totally repugnant to the analogy of faith. For the Saviour, as he bowed his head and gave up the Ghost upon the cross, declared that the work of suffering for the redemption of man, was finished. John 19: 30. And Paul, in another place, says, that Christ being "made perfect by suffering, became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him, and that by one offering he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified." Heb. 5: 9; 10: 14.

To attribute, therefore, any defect to the

sufferings of Christ, which is to be supplied by the sufferings of men for themselves or others, is to overturn the whole system of grace, which rests upon the great doctrine of salvation by the vicarious sufferings and death of Jesus Christ, as of a lamb without blemish, slain from the foundation of the world.

We have now finished what we proposed to say upon the interpretation of the Bible. It only remains to exhort the reader, in a few words, to make this book the subject of his constant study and meditation.

It is most worthy of your profound admiration, confidence and love. If it were, as infidels tell us, a human production, it is immeasurably superior to all other books written by man. Its histories are better attested, and more credible; its poetry is more magnificent; its morality is purer, its doctrines are more weighty; its influence is more salutary. They must have been rare men, who could produce a book like this.

But it is not the work of men. It is the

BOOK OF GOD. Holy men, indeed wrote it, but they wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. And like all the other works of God, it is adapted to the whole family of man, while it displays the unsearchable wisdom of the infinite mind. It has its dazzling mysteries, which confound the pride of human learning, and make the philosophy of the schools appear insignificant, but it has also its pure and simple instructions for the ignorant and the humble. It contains doctrines upon which the loftiest intellect may dwell forever with unfailing interest, and the plainest principles for the guidance of little children. It has steep and rough places where the rash and headstrong adventurer may be dashed in pieces, but it has its verdant meadows, and clear sparkling streams, where the shepherd feeds his flock in safety and in peace.

By cultivating a right state of mind, and applying those simple rules which even plain common sense suggests, every inquirer may travel this celestial road with the assurance that he shall not lose his way, nor fail of eternal life. "Blessed is

the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful: But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night." Ps. 1. Other books are useful and pleasant, and in reading them we may find an intellectual feast; but the Bible only is essential to the spiritual life of man. Other works of God are full of beauty and grandeur, and impart to men a wisdom very important for them to know, but the Bible only reveals the heart of God, and raises the soul into holy fellowship with the powers of the world to come. All knowledge is precious, but the truth as it is in Jesus will be the light of the Spirit, when all other knowledge shall have vanished away.

The Bible is an infinite treasure. Its riches can never be exhausted. Its light can never go out. Its influence can never cease. It is the hammer by which the hard heart is broken in godly sorrow. It is the fire which purges away our spiritual

corruptions. It is the angel of the covenant which guides us through the wilderness of life. It is the manna which comes down every morning upon the desert, and nourishes our souls until we are permitted to eat of the food of Canaan. It is the water that flows from the smitten rock, and follows us in our wearisome journey. It is the foundation of all our hopes, the source of all our consolations, the only support of that faith which works by love, and purifies the heart, and overcomes the world.

“ Within this awful volume lies
The mystery of mysteries ;
And happiest they of human race,
To whom their God has given grace
To read, to learn, to hope, to pray,
To lift the latch and force the way,
But better had they ne’er been born,
Than read to doubt, or read to scorn.”



